

## Wired for Success: Play

Plato, Friedrich Froebel, Jean Piaget, Marie Montessori, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Albert Einstein, Abraham Maslow...the list goes on and on of famous teachers and their thoughts about the importance of play.

“Play.” Such a small word, but a simple search with Google and you will drown in quotes, resources, articles, research, pictures, and even some dissertations. How can one word elicit so much passion and excitement, but not be well understood in practice in our world of ECE? We know children need it, but we are still drawn to the safety of worksheets that can be sent home or the image of children sitting in rows or “crisscross applesauce”, patiently waiting for the teacher. We are attracted to the idea of quiet classrooms where children are working, but the science is screaming that play is the “work” children need to do. There is a disconnect. We know children need play to develop healthy brains, physical and social skills, and yet many programs give them one hour a day to engage in those activities. Here is something to think about: we have mountains of research which emphasize the importance of play, and the same amount of research that confirms the detrimental impact of many current practices in ECE - yet we cling to those old practices for 7 hours a day. Does that make sense?

In my current class, “The Neurobiology of Learning Differences”, we were asked to pick any topic in education and neuroscience, and research the evolution of that topic over time. This meant reviewing articles from 30 years ago, 20 years ago, and then 10 years ago, to demonstrate how the knowledge around that topic has changed. I searched “early childhood” and “executive function (EF) skills”. In 1991, there were 122 peer-reviewed articles related to these topics. Most of the articles were focused on teaching the skill and then measuring the transfer. As you can imagine, the results were grim. Around 2001, the search broadened to 1,205 peer-reviewed articles and the topics still measured transfer but were more focused on skill building in activities (not just teaching the EF skill with no relevance). Then, when I pulled for 2011-2020, the selection opened wider. Almost 7,000 articles from all over the world were available. Most of the articles examined “play” as a means to building EF skills, and the research showed extended transfer in academics. In thirty years, we have come so far in how we understand the brain and how it develops in educational neuroscience. It is known that play builds brains, and not only builds brains, but the skills learned are carried over into more complex thought and academic tasks.

Play is so important to brain development that every mammal baby engages in play to learn skills. Play is seen in every culture worldwide; it is key to teaching skills and to learning how to navigate social situations. It is the most natural thing that occurs between adults and children to share information or to teach. The LEGO Foundation ([learningthroughplay.com](http://learningthroughplay.com)) says play is the foundation of all learning. Through international grants, the company sponsors innovative projects which emphasize play and the importance of play. So how can we add play?

For those open to adding more play, let's jump in! There are types of play: adult-directed play and child-directed play. Which is best? That is up for current debate, but as with everything in life, I would say moderation is key. There are benefits to adult-directed play, and there are studies that indicate specific EF skills develop best under adult-directed play. However, there are play purists who have data showing that free, child-directed play builds specific EF skills as well. And guess what? They are both right.

We know that broccoli is healthy for us. But if you only ate broccoli, you would not be healthy. This is simple and makes sense. The same is true with play - children need a mix of adult-directed play and child-directed play. Together both create skills that the child needs to build a foundation.

In the book, *The Moving Child is a Learning Child*, the authors recommend that children should have unstructured free play (60%); directed free play (25%) and structured play (15%). Also, they recommend the 80-20 guideline, meaning that 80% of a child's active day should be devoted to moving and learning with big moves and big ideas, and 20% should be quiet time.

If a child is engaged, moving, and having fun, they are learning.

Finally, let's talk about you! Play is important for you as well. "Adulting" is hard and mentally taxing. In your job as an early childhood educator, you actually get the opportunity to play. YOU are expected to laugh with the children, move with the children, and be engaged with them in their play. The benefits come to you as well, such as a drop in cortisol, an increase in the happy brain hormones that make you like your job and the very important work you do each day. Play is as important for you as it is for the children – maybe more so. A happy adult is an unstressed adult. We all know that a stressed brain can't teach and a stressed brain can't learn. So, let's get busy and PLAY!

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